RUNNING HEAD: Longitudinal Research on Bullying

"I'm Being Called Names and I'm Being Hit"

Challenges of Longitudinal Research on Bullying Among 11-13 Year-Olds

Abstract

Over the past 25 years a burgeoning literature has emerged which concentrates on the antecedents, experiences, and effects of peer victimisation and bullying in schools. Although many advances have been made in this research area, there remain relatively few research papers in the academic literature that discuss the complexities of research (a) with children, rather than adults, (b) in schools, , or (c) on a sensitive research topic such as bullying. Here, we aim to address this apparent deficit, by drawing on our own experiences of a longitudinal research project, gathering quantitative data, to examine humour use and bullying among children aged 11-13 years, in the UK. We explain and critically evaluate our research choices, from designing questionnaires and engaging with parents, pupils and school staff, to our methods of data collection. In so doing, we highlight both the range of options available to researchers, the importance of dialogue surrounding these choices in the wider research community, and the need for evidence-based best practice in this research area.

Keywords: children, bullying, research, ethics, school

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Our short-term longitudinal research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, examined the role that different humour use may play in the maintenance and resistance of bullying among 11-13 year-olds. The nature of our research topic, and the age of our participants meant that we were faced with challenges in research design and implementation, not all of which are discussed in literature on research with children. Here, we review some of the challenges we faced while working on the project.. Specifically, with reference to our experiences of a longitudinal research project in the UK, this paper will highlight the choices in questionnaire design and dialogue with schools, children and parents, which we navigated in order to work with children in schools. We will discuss how the choices become more complex in the case of research on a sensitive topic, such as bullying. We will show that in certain areas there is research evidence available to support certain choices, whereas in other areas there is little to guide researchers on best practice from the point of view of either the participant or researcher. We argue that what remains is a need for both greater dialogue among researchers who work with children in schools, as well as further research evidence concerning good practice, which takes account of the reality of life in the classroom today.

Our Research Project

Research has found that peer victimization leads to an increase in the use of submissive/non-assertive behaviour from targets, and these behaviours put children at further risk for peer victimization (e.g. see Fox & Boulton, 2006). For example, a study by Sweeting, Young, West & Der (2006) provided evidence in support of a bi-directional relationship

between peer victimization and depressive symptoms. Accordingly, our study looked prospectively at the links between peer victimization and psychosocial maladjustment.

Klein and Kuiper (2006) proposed a further bi-directional relationship between humour and peer victimization. They proposed that bullying may be maintained, through maladaptive, self-defeating humour, which enhances one's relationships with others, but at the expense of the self (e.g. 'I often try to make people like or accept me more by saying something funny about my own weaknesses, blunders and faults' (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray & Weir, 2003). It is proposed that this type of humour reflects an underlying neediness and low self-esteem, which then places children at risk for future victimization. Klein and Kuiper (2006) further proposed that those who use positive, affiliative forms of humour may be perceived more positively and so will be in a better position to form successful alliances with people. Affiliative humour enhances one's relationships with others and reduces interpersonal tensions (e.g. 'I enjoy making people laugh'). (Martin et al., 2003). This style of humour might protect targets from the experience of future peer victimization. Thus, we also looked at how using adaptive, affiliative humour might protect targets from future bullying,

To this end, each of the 1300 children taking part in our project were asked to fill out two questionnaires at the beginning, and two questionnaires at the end, of the school year. Data collection for our project was spread over four sessions. The first questionnaire at each time point assessed humour use and psychological adjustment, while the second questionnaire looked at bullying, peer liking, and friendships. In the first questionnaire, we administered the Child Humour Styles Questionnaire (child HSQ ; Fox, Lyford, & Dean, 2013), which was specifically developed to research humour use in children. It is a 24-item questionnaire, where children are asked to respond on a scale from 1 – 'strongly disagree', to 4 – 'strongly agree'. We measured psychological adjustment in terms of (a) depressive symptoms, using the long-established Child Depression Inventory (Short Form), a 10-item

measure, suitable for children aged 7-17 years (Kovacs & Beck, 1977), (b) loneliness using a four-item measure; the Loneliness and Social Satisfaction Scale, (Asher & Hymel, 1981; Rotenberg, Boulton & Fox, 2005) and (c) self-esteem using Rosenberg's (1965) 10-item, self-report self-esteem measure for adolescents, where children respond from 1 – 'strongly disagree to 4 strongly agree. In the second questionnaire, we used an adapted version of the Direct and Indirect Aggression Scale (Owens, Daly, & Slee, 2005, adapted from Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Osterman, 1992b) to measure experiences of direct verbal, direct physical and indirect bullying and peer victimisation (18 items in total). Children were asked to indicate how often this has happened to them in the current school term (0 = never, 4 = very often). They were also asked to report how often they have engaged in each of the behaviours described, (e.g., called another child a nasty name).

In the same session, to measure liking, friendships, and bullying, we provided children with a list of their classmates' names and asked to rate them for liking, and to nominate their friends, and a very best friend (see Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992a; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Fox & Boulton, 2006). We also asked them to nominate up to three other children in the class who use different humour styles (e.g., who are 'good at making others laugh' or who 'make others laugh by telling jokes and funny stories'), and to nominate up to three classmates who for example, 'get called nasty names by other children'. The same items were re-worded to assess bullying behaviour.

Research Materials and Instructions

The research materials and details of their administration outlined above were carefully chosen, and piloted to match the needs of the project together with the likely level of understanding of the child research participants. Nevertheless, choices had to be made concerning which materials to use, and issues arose during data collection and during inputting and analysis, which were a consequence of the formatting and design of the

research instructions and materials. In this section, we highlight the reasons behind our choice of research materials and some of the challenges we faced.

Understanding Questionnaire Items

It became evident during sessions of data collection that even in classes considered to be of similar, ability (the majority of classes sampled), there was still often a wide degree of variation in individual ability. This was often evident in the variations in pupils' ability to read and understand the questions. Foreseeing this, and not wanting to sacrifice reliability of established scales for simpler language, several questions that seemed to cause confusion in pilot work were explained before participants began to answer the questions. We first asked the participants to look at a particular question and suggest its meaning. The researcher was then able to give a standardised definition considered to be suitable and easier to understand which was provided in the session instructions, delivered to every class taking part. Particular items to which this applied included, "I often get carried away in putting myself down if it makes my friends or family laugh" (child HSQ; Fox, et al., 2013) and "I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others" (Rosenberg, 1965, self-esteem scale). It was also noted by the researchers that a number of children were often unsure about the item, "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself" (self-esteem scale); researchers therefore explained this item to individual children. Explaining the meaning of items with potentially unfamiliar language prior to the questionnaires being filled in seemed to avoid participants missing out these questions or misunderstanding them (vis-à-vis the pilot data).

Item Ambiguity

During sessions of data collection it also became apparent that particular, individual items were perceived ambiguously. The first of these items was found in the short version of the Children's Depression Inventory (Kovacs & Beck, 1977), in which children were asked to select which of three sentences best described them in the previous two weeks. The final item

which asked children to select from, ‘Nobody really loves me’. ‘I am not sure if anybody loves me’ and ‘I am sure that somebody loves me’ seemed to cause confusion. Frequently children would ask if this question related to whether they had a boyfriend or girlfriend whilst others had selected ‘Nobody really loves me’ but added next to the item, “apart from my family”. Similar uncertainty arose when children were asked to indicate how often incidences of bullying such as ‘Being yelled at’ (Direct and Indirect Aggression scale; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992b) had happened to them during the school term. Questions such as whether the item applied to being yelled at by a teacher or sibling were common, as well as whether it counted when the behaviour was just a joke. Although a definition of bullying was provided, it seems that this was not read by all participants. The above experiences seem to demonstrate the importance for researchers of finding any items where the meaning may be ambiguous in established scales and explaining them before data collection.

Ratings Scales

Use of scales with children is one area in which there are a number of good-practice papers (see Betts & Hartley, 2012, for a brief review of these). Both the child HSQ and Rosenberg’s self-esteem measure used the same response scale ranging from, 1, ‘strongly disagree’, through ‘disagree’, ‘agree’, to 4, ‘strongly agree’. Previous work by Fox et al. (2013) had found this to be the most suitable response scale for investigating humour use with children, to avoid mid-point responding, where children tick the middle option on every item, where there is an uneven number of scale points. In addition, we drew on the work of van Laerhoven, van der Zaag-Loonen and Derkx (2004) who stated that Likert-type scales are recommended when using questionnaires with children, and of Chambers and Johnston (2002) who found that only younger children tend towards the extremes of rating scales. Creation of the response scale also drew on the research of Betts and Hartley (2012) who

found that varying the arrangement of rating scales presented to children, affected the way in which they responded (as always placing positive items on the left leads to higher mean scores).

Following from this, both measures contained a number of items which were negatively worded. Experiences during data collection have brought into question the inclusion of negatively worded items, particularly for use with lower ability groups. Including children from all abilities in the research to gain a full and representative dataset was something we saw as important. It is therefore necessary to reflect on the struggle, encountered by several participants to use the response scale to respond to a negatively worded item. Items such as "Even if something is really funny, I will not laugh or joke about it if it will upset someone" (child-HSQ) often led to a child requiring attention during a session or writing next to the item that they were unsure how to respond. Marsh (1986) suggests that only younger children may have trouble comprehending negatively worded items, and as such it was concluded, that these should be included for use with our older participants to discourage mindless ticking of the same response box for every question. However, the burden placed upon older children by negatively-worded items is something that we shall consider carefully in future research.

Peer Nomination Tasks

Our experience of carrying out the research demonstrated the need for attention to careful wording of questions, and also to ensuring that any instructions are listened to and followed. This was particularly important for the ethical administration of peer nomination tasks, as the use of peer reports raises concerns from schools and parents that it could cause children distress. For example, Mayeux, Underwood &. Risser (2007) state that schools and parents may fear that nominating peers for negative behaviours may lead peers to treat one another

more negatively. We thought very carefully about whether or not to use peer reports. Our decision was informed by our knowledge that self-reports of bullying and victimisation can be unreliable, even when using anonymous questionnaires. In addition, teacher and parent reports can also be unreliable as adults are often unaware of much of the bullying that takes place. In contrast, peers do provide the 'insider perspective'; multiple informants are used which can reduce subjectivity and error (Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988). Furthermore, when examining the correlates of peer victimization, peer reports can reduce concerns surrounding shared method variance. This arises when using the same method to assess both variables; a correlation might not reflect a true association between the two variables but the extent to which a child who perceives one aspect of their life in a negative light, perceives another aspect of their life the same way.

The British Psychological Society (2009) states that researchers should "consider all research from the standpoint of research participants, for the purpose of eliminating potential risks to psychological well-being, physical health, personal values, or dignity" (p. 19). Given the concerns noted above we looked at the literature, and determined that there is a wealth of evidence to show that peer-report data collection places children at no greater risk than they encounter in everyday life. Peer reporting of attributes or behaviour (called sociometrics) is a standard method of assessment within the field of child and developmental psychology (see Kearney, Cook, Wechsler, Haight & Stowman (2008). The research has shown that that this method has no appreciable effect on the children who are nominated (Bell-Dolan, Foster & Christopher, 1992; Bell-Dolan, Foster, & Sikora (1989); Hayvren, & Hymel, 1984; Mayeux, et al., ,2007).

Moreover there are steps that can be taken to minimise the risk of harm including the use of positive or neutral peer nomination items, (e.g. 'who is the tallest?'). In the current research we also asked the children about humour styles, (e.g. 'who is good at making other

people laugh?'), and it was hoped that this would make the negative questions less salient. We endeavoured not to conduct the testing immediately before break-time and children were explicitly told not to discuss their answers with their classmates. Furthermore, children were seated at a suitable distance from each other. They were also encouraged to cover up their answers. They were instructed told not to talk to anyone else during testing and to put up their hand if they had a question or any concerns. They were also asked to keep their answers to themselves and to avoid looking at other children's answers. The children were closely monitored during testing by the researcher and the class teacher who were asked to be alert to any signs of distress. Additionally, a section of our website was dedicated to careful explanation of the method, and the above safe-guards, for concerned parents and teachers.

In most classes, children did not discuss their answers with other children during testing; where this was observed, the children were reminded that they should answer the questions in silence. Each class teacher was provided with the contact details for the research team should any issues arise at a later point in time. To our knowledge, the use of peer reports in our study did not lead to any negative consequences. The school staff that supported the research, while indicating some concerns with the procedure at the outset, could see the value in using peer reports. Furthermore, the children did not raise any concerns about nominating each other and we did not receive any communication from parents following the research, who expressed concern. We are therefore confident in our ethical administration of this task, and would encourage more research evidence to determine the risks of a given research method.

The peer nomination task, more than any other, highlighted the importance of careful delivery of instructions. We knew from research by Poulin and Dishion (2008) not to place children's names alphabetically, and to include male and female children in the same nomination lists. Additionally, from pilot work, we were aware that a practice activity using

well-known characters talked through by the researcher would prove highly valuable in preparing participants for the task. This allowed children to get used to filling in the peer nomination forms, and us to check understanding, as a class activity, without having to make reference to any of their peers. The well-known characters that were chosen were famous for certain characteristics (e.g., Wayne Rooney – is good at football) to encourage children to think about others' characteristics in a non-threatening way. Although instructions given to children to nominate no more than three classmates were repeated several times, it was still found that a substantial proportion of participants nominated a higher number of classmates. Similarly, children were asked to cross through the names of absent children who were not taking part; often this was not done by all members of the class. Considering the use of the practice task and repetition of instructions, we were puzzled that this occurred to such an extent. During discussion with teachers, it was suggested that a visual checklist, possibly in the form of a large poster could be trialled in future. We also suspect that participants' eagerness to rush through the questionnaire, particularly if they had completed it at the previous time point, led to instructions not being heard. Given the pervasiveness of this issue in our research project, we would like to know how pervasive non-compliance with instructions is in research with children, and how this is dealt with in other research projects.

The final question featured in the peer nomination activity asked children to give the name of their very best friend. During the collation of data it was noted that this question was frequently left unanswered. We propose a number of reasons for this. It could be that as the question was not included in a table it might not have been noticed as part of the activity, although this is unlikely as a picture was placed next to the question, to draw attention to it. It is possible that children were reluctant to select just one of their friends. Alternatively, as a number of children told the researchers, their best friend was in another class or school. This means that researchers need to highlight this question as well as its importance. Whilst the

issue of having best friends outside the class is difficult to overcome, including an additional question asking children whether or not they have a best friend may be beneficial. It can also be noted that researchers reported that children particularly at the first session, claimed not to know everyone in the class; this may be an issue that requires consultation with schools prior to data collection

Classroom Management and Relationships

This section will deal with the way in which we managed relationships with parents, school staff, and children, including issues surrounding classroom management such as the research environment, giving parental reassurance, working with non-participating children, Teaching Assistant presence, introducing the research, and working effectively with teachers. We highlight several areas where we believe that future research and knowledge exchange is needed.

Although this section is entitled classroom management, it should be noted at the outset that our research was not always conducted in a school classroom *per se.* There were a few times when researchers were asked to conduct the session in the sports hall or school hall. On such occasions, this proved disruptive as children preferred to play games on the computers or engage in sporting activities.

Relationships with School Staff

The decision was taken to recruit children in schools, since all children have to attend school, and this should yield a representative sample of participants (e.g., Testa, & Coleman, 2006). Of course, before entering a school it was necessary to negotiate access with the headteachers (gatekeepers). We followed the recommendations of Isaksen & Roper (2010) in negotiating access to schools. Specifically, we exploited existing links between the researchers and teachers in schools, where possible, and followed up letters with ‘phone calls. Then, where a school was interested in participating, we arranged to meet with the school, to

show them research materials, and to discuss our requirements further. We also offered the school a report of findings, as a feasible incentive for taking part. The path to recruitment was not wholly smooth, with one school agreeing to take part, and then backing out two weeks before data collection, due to over-commitment, and another wherein a deputy head teacher gave us full support, but the headteacher had reservations about peer nomination research. It took over 20 school contacts over four counties, and six months, to recruit six schools to the research study.

On entering a school to do the research, our first contact was often the class teacher who would oversee the research session. As found by Wanat (2008), there was variety in the interest that teachers had in the research project including whether they had looked at the questionnaires and other information sent to the school as samples in advance, and in their willingness to manage class behaviour during the research sessions. In general, teachers were interested in the research and did their best to ensure that the session ran smoothly. The majority of researchers reported only low level disruption (e.g. talking / discussion) in research sessions. In general, where classes were slightly disruptive in this way, the teachers helped to control the behaviour of children, and there were only very few occasions when there were difficulties. In many instances, teachers were reported to have raised their voice to the class, but pupils responded to this, and control of the class was maintained.

In a minority of classes there was some disruption from children walking around the classroom, talking loudly or discussing answers. In these instances it proved very difficult to get the questionnaires completed efficiently and without disruption. Some of the children in these classes were removed from the classroom due to bad behaviour, which meant frequently stopping the class to get names crossed off the peer nomination list. The lack of control in these classes meant the task of collecting data was difficult, and the concentration and enthusiasm for the questionnaire or alternative activity was poor. Having tried to engage

teachers through project information, and in providing school-level reports after data collection, we would welcome suggestions from researchers on other ways to engage teachers proactively in research projects.

Teaching Assistants in the Classroom

Wherever the research was conducted, as researchers, we often found Teaching Assistants (TAs) present, to assist those with learning difficulties. Research has shown that TAs occupy an important position in adapting children's learning materials (Ebersold, 2003; Norwich & Kelly 2004); TAs are doubtless an important part of the classroom. However, when it comes to confidential questionnaires, a notable tension arises. How can researchers ensure equal access to participation, whilst retaining the confidentiality (and indeed data quality) of the participant?

A number of research papers looking at bullying using questionnaires have excluded children with reading difficulties (e.g., Ojala & Nesdale, 2004). As we wanted to look at peer-to-peer relations in the classroom, this would have impacted seriously upon data quality. To deal with this conflict then, during this research TAs were given their own copy of the questionnaire, to read with a child, to encourage them not to look at children's answers and thereby compromise the confidentiality of responses. Most classes were found to be mixed ability groups, and on a couple of occasions researchers were unaware that they would be with a lower ability class until they arrived on the day; thus TAs were of a great support. A minority of children had severe difficulty with reading and understanding the questions, and as such, some teachers and TAs had to point out words on the child's questionnaire.

Providing the TAs with a copy of the questionnaire is only one way of dealing with this tension. When conducting a literature search for the issues of confidentiality in children's questionnaires, with regard to reading difficulties, no research articles were found. We would

argue, given the amount of research conducted in schools, that TA involvement with pupils' research participation does need to be considered carefully.

Relationships with Parents

Our first contact with parents, as is the case with most research projects involving children, was a parent/carer letter and opt-out form. Contact details of the Principal Investigator and the Research Associate were detailed on the letter, which gave parents the opportunity to speak confidentially about project concerns. These were re-sent during the second phase of the research.

Three parents contacted the research team, regarding concern with peer nominations. Research has found that the main concerns with peer nominations are that less popular children will be viewed even more negatively (Asher & Hymel, 1981); children may increase negative interactions with those peers considered to be less preferable (Foster & Ritchey, 1979); and children's feelings of unhappiness or loneliness will increase after reflecting upon their own social standing within the peer group (Bell-Dolan et al., 1989). The parents who contacted us, having discussed their concerns, allowed their children to participate. A small number of opt out slips (<5% of children) were received from parents, some indicating their specific unwillingness to allow their child to do the peer nomination task. Given the generally positive response from parents, we would like to open up discussion among researchers working with children, regarding how to manage relations with caregivers.

The decision to choose the opt-out method of parental consent was informed by research on the characteristics of parents who do/do not return opt-in consent forms and reasons for not returning opt-out consent forms. Parents who do return opt-in consent forms tend to be white, of higher socio-economic status, younger, from two-parent families, female and have higher levels of education (Elickson & Hawes, 1989; Dent, Galaif, Sussman,

Burton, & Flay (1993); Fletcher & Hunter, 2003; Pokorny, Jason, Schoeny, Townsend, & Curie, 2001; Tigges, 2003). Thus, this can introduce selection bias into the sample. Furthermore, some studies using this method have reported unacceptably low response rates, and this can make studies impossible to conduct (Tigges, 2003; White, Hill & Effendi, 2004). Parental consent using this method tends to lead to consent being gained for, on average, 30-60% of the sample (Tigges, 2003). Particularly when using peer reports, this dramatically reduces the reliability and validity of the measure. Research has looked at why people fail to opt-in to studies and this has identified that it is often due to apathy, inertia and lack of motivation, the least likely reason is refusal. Lack of response to passive consent forms, however, has been found to reflect a conscious decision to allow participation (Ellickson & Hawes, 1989).

In sum, our decision to use the 'opt out' method was principally informed by the nature of the study which necessitated a large sample size and the use of peer reports. We do acknowledge the concern that some letters do not always reach parents. Thus, we worked with schools to alert parents to the letter, (e.g. via text message, email, or newsletters). We would be interested to know which media other researchers use to contact parents, and conversely, which methods parents are most likely to use to contact researchers.

Relationships with Children

Previous research indicates that the interaction between children and researcher is a delicate process, as the researcher's role can take on elements of both teacher and mother figure, as disciplinarian and carer (Mauthner, Mayall & Turner, 1993). To distinguish ourselves from the role of teacher, each researcher in this project, upon entering a classroom, introduced themselves to the class by their first name. For the majority of the teachers, this

was acceptable, but in some cases we were asked to call ourselves “Miss” so as to conform to the procedures in the school.

Once the researcher is introduced, care needs to be taken to present the research topic clearly to children, with papers recommending that researchers introduce themselves as people who want to ‘find out what children think about things' (Farquhar, 1990). In this project, we informed children that we were interested in finding out their views on things they find funny, if they believe they can make themselves and other people laugh, and whether they can cheer themselves up by thinking of funny things. We went on to state that we were also interested in their views on bullying in schools. Children appeared happy with this explanatory introduction, and progressed to complete the questionnaire satisfactorily, knowing what they were going to be asked about.

Before data collection began, it was imperative, in line with ethical guidelines, to ensure the positive and voluntary collaboration of the participants. We worked with a youth council before conducting the research, to ascertain how they felt about the study. They understood the aims of the research, and felt that the methods were fair and necessary in accordance with those aims. This becomes more important when working in classrooms, where children might see the research as “another piece of schoolwork” (Denscombe & Aubrook, 1992) or participate (or not) because their friends are participating. Thus, children were asked for their consent (children’s consent is an issue that has received extensive coverage in the literature; see for example, Cocks, 2006). They were told that they did not have to take part if they did not wish to and that they could stop taking part at any time. Alternative activities were provided discretely by the research team, concurrently with research questionnaires, for children who did not wish, or did not have permission, to take part. This process was repeated at the second stage of testing towards the end of the school year.

Furthermore, the first session involved the children completing the measures of psychological adjustment and the child HSQ. During this session the children were informed about the second session planned for up to a week later, which would involve answering questions about bullying and victimisation and questions about their classmates. The children were reminded that a letter had been sent home asking for their parent to send the letter back if they did not want their children to take part. The children were explicitly told to discuss the research and their participation with their caregivers (if they had not done so already). Also, they were told that even if they had already participated, they could decide not to take part in the next session. If they had any concerns about their participation they were advised to speak to the researcher, their family, or to their teacher.

One strategy, which we adopted to help children understand the purpose of our research visit was to emphasise the need for new knowledge `to find out more about' or to explain the policy implications `to help people', or `to provide more information . . . ' (Farquhar, 1990). The majority of children who opted to participate seemed eager and willing to complete the questionnaires, and valued the presence of the researcher as a novel learning opportunity, in line with findings from Baxter (2012). In general, classes were found to work well together, and children seemed happy with the classroom layout for the peer nomination tasks.

At the outset, again in line with the BPS (2009) ethical framework, we had to ensure that children understood the *confidential* nature of their questionnaire responses, whilst at the same time safe-guarding their well-being. That is, we had to consider the possibility of feeding back to schools the names of children who self-reported as having been bullied or bullied others and who had been nominated by other children as bullies or targets of bullying. Here, there was less guidance in the literature than that surrounding the issue of consent. To optimise children’s honest engagement with the tasks, we decided to be clear with children

about the confidential nature of their responses. School staff did not have access to individual children's responses and this was emphasised to the pupils. Whilst the data we collected meant that we knew which children were victimised or depressed, we did not think that it would be appropriate to pass on this information to the schools involved. While it is important to protect vulnerable children, if we were to break confidentiality in this way, we would have to inform children at the outset that this was a real possibility. This could have affected participation rates and also the quality of the data (see Lothen-Kline, Howard, Hamburger, Worrell & Boekeloo, 2003). Furthermore, the data that we collected would not have given us enough information to make a decision as to the level of risk for each child; in each school we could be passing on the names of 10-20 pupils. As noted by Williamson, Goodenough, Kent and Ashcroft (2005) it is important to be clear-cut when defining the boundaries of confidentiality to children.

So, instead, we told all children that any information they gave in response to questions on the questionnaire would be kept confidential, with two exceptions. First, if they wrote anything extra on their questionnaire or said something to one of us that gave us cause for concern, this would be passed back to the school, and second, if they asked us to pass information back to their school, this would be done for them. We included a question at the end of each questionnaire to allow for this. The children were asked to indicate yes or no as to whether they would be happy for us to tell the school if they were being bullied or bullying others *and* for an adult in the school to talk to them about it. This left control over the situation to the child. Our concern was that by adopting the approach of feeding back information to each school, children could potentially be left feeling anxious about the responses they had given, not knowing if their teacher was going to be told anything about them and if their teacher would want to speak to them about it (a concern highlighted by Williamson et al., 2005, who state that this anxiety can cause more distress than providing

information about how children can get help for themselves). In using the question at the end of the questionnaire, many children did ask for support, writing, for example, that they were "being called names and […] being hit". Thus, over 100 children received help from their school as a direct result of their research participation.

Whereas research reports cover those children who chose to participate, as researchers, we must also work positively with those who have chosen (or whose family have chosen for them) not to take part. Here again, there seemed to be relatively little guidance in the extant literature. For children who opted out of the study (either individual or parental) an alternative activity was given. This varied between the data collection sessions, but in all instances, was research-related, and encouraged children to think about the issues surrounding bullying, and how it can be prevented and stopped. All researchers reported that the alternative activity saw more engagement than disengagement from pupils. This is in line with previous research, which has found that structured alternative activities can assist in stimulating the child as much as possible, and gain their cooperation in later group tasks (Mauthner, 1997). As found in our research, alternative activities also aid in keeping the whole class quiet, as each child is working independently on a task that requires thought and concentration. Flexibility in working with non-participating children is paramount. There were a couple of instances where staff members were either not aware of our alternative activity (and consequently had other plans for the non-participating children), or requested that children continue with their projects or classwork instead of the bullying activity. However this was not a problem as such children were still able to work quietly without disrupting the rest of the class.

Children were debriefed at the end of each session. This gave us further opportunity to encourage them to speak to an adult (e.g. teacher or a parent) about any concerns they might have and children were also each provided with a Childline card. Most classes took up our

offer of an anti-bullying workshop where they could explore the issues raised in their debrief more fully. During the debrief, we found that children would then raise appropriate and relevant questions about the research. Overall, children seemed satisfied with the debrief and in the majority of cases were pleased to have been a part of an important research study. Schools were also pleased to receive two research reports, one at the end of each data collection stage, reflecting the level of bullying and victimisation at their school. Beyond this, two researchers on the project worked with classes of (older) children to discuss research design and methods. Thus, the relationships between school, class, and researcher can be mutually collaborative.

Concluding Remarks

We started by asking ourselves how research could inform our practice with regards to the challenges we faced on our longitudinal research project. This paper has highlighted the maze of choices, spanning questionnaire design and dialogue with schools, children and parents, which researchers must navigate, in order to work with children in schools. We show how the choices become more complex in the case of research on a sensitive topic, such as bullying. We have shown that in certain areas (e.g. parental consent) there is research evidence available to support certain choices, whereas in other areas (e.g., Teaching Assistant involvement) there is little to guide researchers on best practice from the point of view of either the participant or researcher. Writing this paper has lead us to ask why research papers often do not address the potentially complex process involved in working with people as outlined above, or the reasoning behind methodological decisions. For our part, in light of our experiences, we'd like see greater clarity with regards to best practice for both participant and researcher in studies with children on sensitive topics.

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